

JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
MR. EUGENE N. HARRIS

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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Interviewers

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(date)

Interviewee

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Oct 3 1974


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Birth and Background -----	6
Father is Business Neighbor to Funeral Director -----	8
Early Funeral Vehicles -----	9
Wunderlich & Harris and Livery Stables -----	11
Marriage and Family.-----	17
The Depression (The Plague) -----	18
First Motor-Driven Funeral -----	21
Joliet Schools -----	22
Kiwanis Club Begins in Joliet -----	25



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WILSON: This is an interview with Mr. Eugene N. Harris for the Oral History Project by Donald Wilson.

WILSON: Where were you born, Mr. Harris?

HARRIS: Where was I born . . . near Wauponsee Station, nine miles south of Morris, Illinois. W-A-U-P-S-O-N-E-E, Wauponsee.

WILSON: When did you come to Joliet?

HARRIS: 1897.

WILSON: How did you get here?

HARRIS: On the Rock Island Railroad.

WILSON: Do you remember how old you were when you came?

HARRIS: Figure it out . . . Where's something I can figure on?
(Harris gets paper and pencil and figures out how old he was.)
13.

WILSON: You were 13?

HARRIS: Thirteen years old.

WILSON: How long did it take to get here, do you remember?

HARRIS: From Morris, Illinois -- I wouldn't know.

WILSON: Why did your family decide to move to Joliet?

HARRIS: Because my father decided.

WILSON: Did he have a job here? Where did he work?

HARRIS: Oh, he was an elevator operator. In those days, they had these great big grain elevators scattered all over the country, you know, along the railroad tracks. They put them along the railroad tracks because they had the farmers load these elevators up with oats and corn and barley, or whatever they loaded them up with; and they had to get freight cars to put them in. That's what my father's job was. Running a grain elevator was to get the bins filled up by the farmers with their lumber wagons, you know. There were no automobiles in those days, you know -- only horses and wagons. What else do you want to know?

WILSON: Well, where did you first live in Joliet?

HARRIS: On First Avenue, my father had rented a house from Judge Diebell. D-I-E-B-E-L-L, Judge Diebell. It was on First Avenue, right close to Richards Street. I can remember that part very well because when I went to school, all I had to do was go out the door. George Decker's home was right next to where my father had the house. Did you ever know George Decker?

WILSON: No, I didn't.

HARRIS: Well, you didn't know him. He had a great big store on Chicago Street -- near Clinton.

WILSON: Is the store still there now?

HARRIS: That I don't know; there's been so darn many fires over

there. See, that was a long time ago. If you want to know how long ago, I'll tell you pretty close.

WILSON: O.K.

HARRIS: What is it right now?

WILSON: 1974.

HARRIS: Oh yes, 1974, and that was 1897. So, that would be 5 and 9 from 18 is 9. 95 years.

WILSON: Ninety-five years, it's been?

HARRIS: That's right, that's what I figured out.

WILSON: Where did you first go to school at?

HARRIS: The Richards Street School, corner of Richards Street and . . . it was the name of that school, and I don't really think of the name of it -- but it was a public school . . . at the corner of . . . I can't tell you. I kind of think they called it the Lincoln School, but I don't know if that was right or not.

WILSON: Well, when did you first decide to become an undertaker, or how did you decide to become one?

HARRIS: My father had operated the Joliet Tea Company in one of the stores of the Masonic Temple that he was renting. In the other store, immediately east of the one my father had, was Hughes and Shutts Undertaking Establishment. You aren't old enough to remember Hughes and Shutts either. You never heard

of them, did you?

WILSON: No, I never did.

HARRIS: Hughes and Shutts, and they were next door to my father. One day one of them, probably John Shutts, went to my father and wanted to know if he cared if they wanted me to sleep in their place nights to answer their telephones. In those days, we had the Northwestern Telephone (was that what they called it, or was it just the Western?) You don't know.

WILSON: I don't know.

HARRIS: . . . and, the Chicago Telephone Company, that's now the Illinois Bell Telephone. In those days, they called it the Chicago Telephone Company. I slept there, in their place for several years, that was right next door to my father's tea store. Then, next to my father was a big hallway where people coming down from the Masonic Temple went through a big, wide hall to take an elevator and go up to the second and fourth floors. I don't know what Towne had to do with it, but a fellow by the name of Towne that ran the grocery store, he was evidently a good friend of my father's, and he was very friendly to us. I don't know how -- you asked how I decided to be an undertaker. That's right?

WILSON: That's right.

HARRIS: I don't know how I decided, that's a heck of a long

time ago. Anyway, my mother came down one day, right in front of the office, and gave me a check that she made out for me to pay my fee, or what was required, to go the Chicago College of Embalming, in Chicago. Do you know anything about embalming?

WILSON: No, I don't.

HARRIS: Oh, you don't know anything about it. Well, anyway -- eventually after, I think about three years, I graduated from that place and it seems to me that there was a fellow by the name of William C. Wunderlich that had a funeral establishment. (Wilson shows Harris an old newspaper clipping advertising Harris's funeral home.) Where did you get that?

WILSON: Out of an old paper. Do you remember that?

HARRIS: This man Wunderlich, he came and wanted to know (he was kinda getting old -- isn't that funny?)

WILSON: How old do you think that is?

HARRIS: This paper? Holy Mackerels! I don't have no idea. But anyway, I can tell you one thing -- that I was in partnership with Wunderlich and absolutely the only establishment in Will County that is equipped with every accessory for conducting funerals by automobile or horse-drawn vehicles. We still have both. We had three horse-drawn hearses, and two horse-drawn ambulances. For a long time it was just Wunderlich and Harris. Then Sonntag was a fellow that had a drug store in Plainfield, and he came in one day and wanted to know (I had two funerals

that I had taken care of in Plainfield, did you ever hear of Plainfield?)

WILSON: Yes.

HARRIS: He was quite interested in the way I had the flowers handled and everything like that. He came in and talked to Wunderlich and I, and said he wished he could get in the funeral business. He was in the drug store.

WILSON: Was that your first funeral parlor -- in Plainfield?

HARRIS: That was at the corner of . . . where are we here? Is this here Cass Street?

WILSON: Yes it is.

HARRIS: Wunderlich and I -- without Sonntag, (Sonntag wasn't in it yet) we had a place at the corner of Cass and Scott Street, and we conducted the funeral business. He was very prominent in St. Peter's German Lutheran Church. He did just about all the business that was done from there. I was very active because my mother had taken me down (my mother was a Quaker, did you ever hear of the Quakers?)

WILSON: Yes, I did.

HARRIS: My mother was a Quaker. Born a Quaker, and raised a Quaker. She was watching what I was doing, while my father wasn't because he was always in that elevator. I think my mother had a peculiar, fine instinct for making the kids behave

themselves. She kept me pretty straight. That's the way we operated. Eventually, Sonntag came in. One day Sonntag, while he was still in partnership with Wunderlich and Harris, some real estate man came to Sonntag and talked him into buying the Lambert house (that's where Sonntag-Wiley is now). Do you know where that is?

WILSON: No, I don't.

HARRIS: I think that's the corner of Benton and Herkimer or something. I'm not sure about Herkimer, but anyway, now it's Sonntag and Wiley. Wiley was working for Wunderlich and Harris for a long time. When Sonntag went along and bought the Lambert property to make a funeral home out of it, he took two kids with him that weren't for us. One of them, I can't think of his name, he worked for us for a long time. Anyway, that's the way the situation was handled. Wunderlich and Harris, the two of us, we had bought out a livery stable that was on . . . What is the street that is right along the river?

WILSON: Bluff Street?

HARRIS: That's on the other side of the river.

WILSON: Could it be Joliet Street?

HARRIS: I think it was Des Plaines Street. Is there a Des Plaines Street?

WILSON: Yes.

HARRIS: Right a little bit north of Jefferson Street. Do you know Jefferson?

WILSON: Yes.

HARRIS: We had fifty teams, but I can't remember the number of single horses -- single buggies we had, we used to rent them. Men used to come down to rent a horse and buggy to take somebody for a ride. Some single fellow that wanted to take his girl out or something, I don't know what it was.

WILSON: Where would they take them?

HARRIS: Where would they take them? The Lord only knows, I didn't know; they just went for a ride.

WILSON: What was there to do on a date in Joliet back then if you took a girl out?

HARRIS: The Lord only knows. I can't think; that's a long time ago because as years went on, maybe I had a girl here and there, and maybe I took one of the horse and buggies, and took a ride. I'll tell you where most of us took a ride to -- there was a park in Plainfield, did you ever know that?

WILSON: No.

HARRIS: I think they called it the Plainfield Park -- it was along the river in Plainfield, and everybody used to go out there and they'd take their lunch and have a little picnic because there was little tables and two or three chairs scattered

all over that park for a fellow to take his girl, wife, or somebody for a day's ride out there.

WILSON: When you bought the stables, were you still in the undertaking business?

HARRIS: Oh Lord no! An undertaker has to use an awful lot of vehicles. Do you know what a hack is?

WILSON: No.

HARRIS: You don't know what a hack is? Well see, there was no automobiles for people to ride to the funeral with; you had to have horses and hacks. You don't know what a hack is?

WILSON: No.

HARRIS: Well, that's a vehicle that four people can ride in, two facing the other two, see. Then the driver of the hack was up on top of the hack in the front. I can't understand you not knowing what a hack is! You just never rode in one.

WILSON: I probably knew them by some other name than hack. I can picture in though.

HARRIS: It was H-A-C-K, hack. O.K. -- what else?

WILSON: How about people dying back then, do you remember any accidents? There probably weren't too many traffic accidents back then, but do you remember any diseases or accidents?

HARRIS: Once in a while there was accidents. Accidents on the

railroad -- there was the Santa Fe, the Chicago, the Rock Island, the Michigan Central. Don't you know all those railroads?

WILSON: I've heard of them.

HARRIS: But you don't know them; you're not acquainted with them.

WILSON: Santa Fe.

HARRIS: I can't understand that. You don't want that anymore.

WILSON: Well, maybe the teacher would like it back. It's the teacher's.

HARRIS: Teacher's?

WILSON: That's his.

HARRIS: This? What are you going to do with it?

WILSON: I'll just put it over here.

HARRIS: You don't want to give it to me, huh?

WILSON: I don't know, it's up to him.

HARRIS: Who's the teacher?

WILSON: Mr. Sterling.

HARRIS: Sterling . . . Was his father the superintendant of Oakwood Cemetery?

WILSON: I don't think so.

HARRIS: I'll bet a nickel he was. That Sterling out at Oakwood Cemetery, he had a lot of sons. Several -- I think three.

WILSON: Do you remember what old funeral homes were around?

HARRIS: Well now, let me see. There was one on Chicago Street, just north of . . . and there was Dames -- Dames is still on the west side, but Dames was on Bluff Street. Did you ever hear of him?

WILSON: Yes, Fred C. Dames? Gerald Dames?

HARRIS: Well, it was his uncle.

WILSON: Gerald?

HARRIS: No, Gerald was on Sherman Street, I think.

WILSON: He's still there.

HARRIS: Oh, is he? And Fred C. is dead. He died down in Florida. He got two or maybe three sons that are running that now.

WILSON: What's the oldest cemetery around here?

HARRIS: The oldest was Oakwood Cemetery, St. Patrick's Cemetery, on West Jefferson Street. And then there was another one that was a big one, if I could think of it. (Pause) From the time I went with Wunderlich, till I left Wunderlich and went to South Eastern Avenue . . . Where do you live now?

WILSON: Walsh Street.

HARRIS: Walsh Street. Somebody told me a couple days ago that they lived on Walsh Street, and I can't think who they are. Isn't that funny? (Pause) I can't think. I was talking to somebody just the other day that told me they lived on Walsh Street. Did you know Father Hoover?

WILSON: Monsignor Hoover.

HARRIS: Monsignor Hoover, he was one of the best friends I ever had.

WILSON: How long did you know him?

HARRIS: Until he died.

WILSON: When did you first meet him?

HARRIS: That's one I never could tell, because we were very good friends for an awful long time. Often times when I was on 20 Southeastern Avenue, he used to come (he always used to like to talk to my wife too; I had a marvelous wife.) You never knew where the Hutchison Shoe Company was, did you?

WILSON: No.

HARRIS: You never heard of it? How old are you?

WILSON: Eighteen.

HARRIS: Well, the Hutchison Shoe Store was on Chicago Street,

just a little bit north of Jefferson Street. Anyhow, I married Bess Hutchison, and she's got a son, and I've got a son by the name of Bob (you saw a postal card from him.) He is a teacher at Harvard University at Boston, Massachusetts. Doctor of Philosophy, that's my son. My daughter is in the hospital at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania now; she had an operation yesterday. She's getting along alright because her daughter called me up last night and told me that she was (the doctor reported) that she was getting along fine. That was last night. Now this daughter of her's, my granddaughter, is an officer of the Chemical National Bank in New York City, and she's the one anybody has to go to if they want to borrow money. She's the one that has to make it out, and has the fellow that loans the money have permission to loan this guy money. She has to investigate anybody that wants to borrow money. That's her job.

WILSON: Last time we talked, you mentioned something about a plague or disease that killed a lot of people in Joliet?

HARRIS: Disease? What do you want to know about disease?

WILSON: Well, I wanted to know if there was a plague, if a lot died?

HARRIS: A plague? I'll tell you an awful one, I'm surprised you don't know all about it. There's so many things that you don't know yourself that I can't understand!

WILSON: Well, that's why I'm asking you, so I can find them out.

HARRIS: We had an awful bad epidemic here a few years ago -- in 1930. My gosh! And this is 1974? Why that's 40 years ago?

WILSON: 44 years.

HARRIS: 44 years! Good gosh, all hemlock! You get your folks or someone to tell you about a panic. I guess they called it a panic; I think they did. In 1930, in Joliet, Wunderlich and I were in business then; and we had to give everybody so much credit that it was awful.

WILSON: Do you remember how many people died from it?

HARRIS: Well that was financial trouble, it wasn't so much sickness; but everybody went broke. You don't remember that! Oh, you aren't forty yet; how old are you?

WILSON: Eighteen.

HARRIS: Oh my gosh! No wonder you don't know. Talk to your father and mother about that. About 1930.

WILSON: When you first went in business, how much did a funeral cost? Do you remember?

HARRIS: When we first started the business, Wunderlich and Harris, (we didn't have Sonntag then.) Wunderlich and Harris . . . well, it was before 1930 because Wunderlich and I were in business when we had those hard times, in 1930. Jeepers, the way time gets away! It's awful, isn't it? Who's that? Hello Georgie, my boy, what can I do for you? (A fellow resident of

the retirement home dropped in).

GEORGE: Nothing, what can I do for you? Get out of here?

HARRIS: No, it's alright, this gentleman is . . . where are you from?

WILSON: Joliet Junior College.

HARRIS: Oh, he's from the Joliet Junior College, interviewing me about something.

GEORGE: If you were as old as him, you could grow whiskers!

HARRIS: Now tell me something, you tell me something -- what was that thing we had here in Will County in 1930.

GEORGE: Don't ask me, I was in Chicago. I was from Chicago, I don't know what the hell was out here.

HARRIS: Oh, you was in Chicago? Well, you had it in Chicago too. The same thing -- hard times.

WILSON: Depression?

HARRIS: 1930, don't you remember that?

GEORGE: I worked all the time during depression. I was one of the lucky ones, I worked all the time.

HARRIS: Oh, you worked all the time? I don't know.

GEORGE: I'll see you.

HARRIS: Alright, what else?

WILSON: When did you get your first motorized ambulance?

HARRIS: I think maybe I got records that I could tell in an old checkbook. What did you ask me what I got?

WILSON: The first motorized ambulance.

HARRIS: The first motorized ambulance, jeepers, I can't tell you. We had all kinds of these fellows from Chicago coming down there and talking to Wunderlich and me wanting to sell us motor-driver ambulances, hearses, and hacks, and everything like that. We just talked it over when those agents went away, and decided to be one of the first in Will County to buy that kind of equipment. I kinda think we were the first to have hearse and ambulance, as far as I know. You're asking me something that's kinda hard to answer. You can't remember the dates on things like that because that was probably pretty close to 1910 or 1912. That's quite a long time ago.

WILSON: Do you remember the year that you bought your first funeral home?

HARRIS: No, I went in with Wunderlich where he was, at the corner of Cass and Scott. Would that be one block from here?

WILSON: A block and a half.

HARRIS: Block and a half. Oh.

WILSON; You never did tell me what a funeral costs, did you?
To pay for the casket, the burial services, and embalming.

HARRIS; I don't know. I think the first motor-driven funeral we had went to St. Peter's Church. Some fellow that was a member of St. Peter's German Lutheran Church. Where do you go to church?

WILSON: St. Ray's.

HARRIS: St. Raymond's. Oh, that's on Raynor Avenue. I wonder if it's on account of that street that they named it St. Raymond's.

WILSON: I don't think so. They named it after a saint -- St. Raymond Nonnatus.

HARRIS: Oh, St. Raymond Nonnatus, is that impossible?

WILSON: When you were growing up, what kind of games did you play? Did you play baseball?

HARRIS: Well, I think probably the most common was baseball. The schools, every year from probably fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and I remember when I was going to Richards Street school. I know I was in sixth grade. When we left Morris, I think I was in the sixth grade at the Morris school. We lived on the same corner as the big school in Morris.

WILSON: Do you remember what school that was? Did they just call it the Morris School?

HARRIS: I know the name of the grade, but I can't think. Boy, that's too long ago, jeepers!

WILSON: Were there many schools in Joliet? Grade schools, when you first started school?

HARRIS: Oh yes, the one on Richards Street, the Richards Street School, then there was another city school in the sixth ward. They called it the Sixth Ward. The Richards Street was the seventh ward. Then, of course, I think there was different schools even like the West today, only not so big.

WILSON: Did they just have one high school then? Just one high school, Joliet Central?

HARRIS: That hadn't started yet. No, the high school was at the corner of Chicago and just a little ways north of -- oh, boy, you got me puzzled now about street names.

WILSON: Joliet Central wasn't built then?

HARRIS: Joliet Central was not. I graduated from Joliet Central. First I went to a high school that was on Chicago street. I can't remember the corner now. I think that's where, it seems to me that's where Sears-Roebuck is on that property now. I think, I'm not sure. I kinda think Sears-Roebuck is up there.

WILSON: What about Joliet Catholic High? De LaSalle?

HARRIS: Joliet Catholic High, wasn't that on the West side?

WILSON: Right on Broadway Street.

HARRIS: Gee, I remember because we went there to play baseball from the Richards Street School. That was before I went to high school, see. Probably the seventh and eighth grades -- the teams, I think I was on one of the sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade. Then when I went to high school, I was on some kind of an affair, but I can't tell you much about it. Where do you go to high school now?

WILSON: I don't now, I went to Joliet Catholic High.

HARRIS: Oh, Joliet Catholic High, where was that?

WILSON: On Broadway Street.

HARRIS: Broadway. Oh.

WILSON: When you went to embalming school in Chicago, how long would it take you to get there?

HARRIS: Well, I took the Rock Island train.

WILSON: Where was the train station, right where it is now?

HARRIS: No, they hadn't built the depot yet. I remember when they built the depot. I remember that very well.

WILSON: How long ago was that, that they built the depot?

HARRIS: Why don't you go to some fellow that kept history? I just can't tell you dates like that.

WILSON: Well, you can give me a general idea.

HARRIS: Well, the Rock Island Depot was down . . . it was just like an old-fashioned depot.

WILSON: Where was it at, do you remember?

HARRIS: There are people that ought to remember things like that, but I can't. I'm now ninety years old.

WILSON: When was your birthday?

HARRIS: It will be the 17th of December. I haven't had it yet, but somebody put that in the paper the other day, about my birthday.

WILSON: Oh, I saw your picture from the Kiwanis show.

HARRIS: Yes, that's right.

WILSON: They said you had a great deal in starting the Kiwanis. When did you first join that?

HARRIS: Well, I was the first one to make an application to join the Kiwanis Club. The fellow was a preacher; he was a minister that came. I can remember; he came and gave me a card. He was a Presbyterian minister, and he was going to start this club; but they hadn't decided on a name of it yet. He wanted to know if I would be willing to be one of the first members. So we talked it over, and I finally told him I had to get rid of him because I had work to do, and I think they gave him two dollars.

WILSON: How did they get the name, Kiwanis?

HARRIS: I ought to know all the history of that thing because I have gone into it. I was president of the Kiwanis Club in 1900 and something; I can't think of the date, but I was president quite a number of years ago.

WILSON: Did you sell peanuts then?

HARRIS: We have a day every year that is all over the United States. The Kiwanis Clubs have Peanut Day. That's right, didn't you ever hear of it?

WILSON: Yes, I've heard of Peanut Day.

HARRIS: Yes, well that was it.

WILSON: Have they been doing that for a long time?

HARRIS: Oh, for quite a number of years. I can't tell you a certain day; it's the Chicago office that has to. See, the Kiwanis Club is all over the world; it's an international organization. It wasn't until about five years ago that people came from foreign countries and wanted to start the same thing over there. So they sent an organizer with them, out of these fellows to start them. They started them in France, England, and Spain. They've got them all over Europe. They got some in Africa, and I think last year they started one in China. It's an international organization all over the world. I guess they're all selling peanuts. (Laughter) Someplace, if I knew where they were, I'd get you some of those peanuts because I had so many

packages of them. Maybe someday if I can see you when I got some, I'll give you an envelope of peanuts. Why, didn't you see any fellows along the corners that were selling peanuts?

WILSON: I got some.

HARRIS: Oh, you did see them. I was at the First National Bank, at the corner. Well, I started in front and somebody came and said they had more people coming in the back, and I'd be better off if I'd go to the back door. Boy, I guess I was getting about twice as many collections last year. I went to the back door. Are you acquainted with the First National Bank?

WILSON: Yes, I am.

HARRIS: Well, you know how there is a place where you go in the back door? I was right there by that column, and I had two assistants helping me there. Boy, it was awful, the people coming in. I had one Italian man. Now I'm not positive of this, but I think there were two Italian men that folded up dollar bills and put them in the hole of the can that I had, and one of them -- I think, I didn't see it until he started to fold it up -- I think it was a five dollar bill. It was a colored fellow. I don't know of anybody putting less than a quarter in the can. Didn't you see the cans that all of them had?

WILSON: Yes, I did.

HARRIS: Oh, you saw that. Well then, you know how we were doing it.

WILSON; That's about it. That's all I have to ask you.

HARRIS; Does that take care of it? Well, that's fine, that's a good idea.

WILSON; Yes, it is.

INDEX

- accidents, 13
- Africa, 25
- automotive hearses, 9, 13
- automobiles, 6, 13
- Benton Street, 11
- Bluff Street, 11, 15
- Broadway, 23
- buggies, 12
- Cass Street, 10, 20
- Chemical National Bank, (of New York), 17
- Chicago College of Embalming, 9, 23
- Chicago Railroad, 14
- Chicago Street, 6, 10, 15, 16, 22
- Chicago Telephone Company, 8
- childhood, 5
- China, 25
- Clinton Street, 6
- Dames, Fred, 15
- Dames, Gerald, 15
- daughter, 7
- Decker, George, 6
- depression, 19
- Des Plaines Street, 11
- Diebell, Judge, 6
- Eastern Avenue, 15
- England, 25
- epidemic, (financial), 18
- Europe, 25
- father, 5, 7, 8, 10
- First Avenue, 6
- First National Bank, 26
- France, 25
- grain elevators, 6, 10
- hacks, 13, 20
- Harvard University, 17
- hearses, 20
- Herkimer Street, 11
- Hoover, Monsignor, 16
- horses, 12, 13
- horse-drawn ambulances, 9
- horse-drawn hearses, 9, 13
- Hughes & Shutts Undertaking Est., 7, 8
- Hutchison, Bess, 17
- Hutchison Shoe Company, 16
- Illinois Bell Telephone Company, 8
- Jefferson Street, 12, 15, 17
- Joliet, 5
- Joliet Catholic High School, 22, 23
- Joliet Central, 22
- Joliet Junior College, 19
- Joliet Street, 11
- Joliet Tea Company, 7, 8
- Kiwanis Club, 24, 25
- Kiwanis Show, 24
- Lambert House, 11
- Lincoln School, 7
- livery stable, 11, 13
- lumber wagons, 6
- Masonic Temple, 7, 8
- Massachusetts, Boston, 17
- Michigan Central Railroad, 14
- Morris, Illinois, 5, 21
- mother, 9, 10
- motorized ambulances, 20
- New York City, 17
- Northwestern Telephone Company, 8
- Oakwood Cemetery, 14, 15
- panic, (depression of 1930), 18
- "Peanut Day", 25, 26
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 17
- plague, 17
- Plainfield, Illinois, 9, 10, 12
- Plainfield Park, 12
- Quakers, 10
- Raynor Avenue, 21
- real estate, 11
- Richard's Street, (school), 6, 7, 21, 22, 23
- Rock Island Depot, 23, 24

Rock Island Railroad, 5, 14, 23

Santa Fe Railroad, 14

Scott Street, 10, 20

Sears, Roebuck, 22

Sherman Street, 15

son(s), 17

Sonntag, 9, 18

Sonntag & Wiley Funeral Home, 11

South Eastern Avenue, 15, 16

Spain, 25

Sterling, Mr., (Robert E.), 14

St. Patrick's Cemetery, 15

St. Peter's German Lutheran Church, 10, 21

St. Raymond, Nonnatus, 21

Towne, Mr., 8

undertaker, 7, 8, 13

Walsh Street, 16

Wauponsee Station, 5

Wiley, Mr., (Sonntag & Wiley), 11

Will County, 9, 19

Wunderlich, William C., 9, 15, 20

Wunderlich & Harris, 9, 18, 20

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